

The first verse¹

God's Word starts off with those impressive words in Genesis chapter one. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." What a powerful and deep opening word of divine revelation! There is nothing else like this in the so-called creation stories of man's imagination. This is revelation! For that reason this opening verse continues to speak so directly to man today.

In the beginning

"In the beginning" The context indicates that this is the very first beginning, the start of the world when time itself began. Before this beginning, before creation, there was no time, only eternity. God was. He is eternal and His existence is here presupposed. "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever Thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting Thou art God" (Psalm 90:2). God is without a beginning and without an end. We cannot understand eternity, for we are finite, created beings. We cannot reach out with our minds and comprehend the situation before time started.

When we read "In the beginning" in Genesis 1, we can also think of John 1:1. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." The Word is a designation of the second person of what we call the Trinity, namely, the Son. He was with God the Father in the beginning. The designation "God" often refers to the Father in the Old Testament and that is the case here. In Genesis 1:2 we read about the Holy Spirit. "The Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters." The triune God was there in the beginning, active in the work of creation (cf., e.g., Hebrews 1:10; Colossians 1:16; Psalm 33:6; Isaiah 40:12-14).

God created

It is noteworthy that the subject of the Hebrew word for "create" is always God and never a human being or a false god. God is the only One who creates. The context makes it clear that this work of the creation of heaven and earth did not consist of making something out of what already existed, but it brought into being what did not exist. (In this connection it is interesting, although not decisive for this understanding, that the verb "create" is never used with a preposition or accusative of the material from which God creates.)

Elsewhere Scripture elaborates on this creation work of God, which our Confession describes as creation "out of nothing" (Belgic Confession, Art. 12).² We read in Psalm 33:9, "He spoke and it came to be; He commanded and it stood forth" (cf. v.6). Similarly Psalm 148, referring to the heavens, says, "He commanded and they were created" (v.5; cf. Isaiah 48:13).

The heaven and the earth

In Hebrew, the word for heaven is always in the plural and therefore one can also translate "the heavens and the earth." The heaven(s) and the earth are the totality of creation. This is everything. "Heaven(s)" must here therefore be understood in as broad a sense as possible. Even today, despite our twentieth-century perspective, we, as creatures living on earth, think of the universe as "heaven and earth."

This phrase also points to the unity of creation. It is used everywhere in Scripture where the one creation work of God is referred to (e.g. Genesis 2:4; Psalm 121:2; II Peter 3:7,13). Although heaven and earth are clearly distinguished, yet there is a close bond between them. Whether one thinks in the first place of the earth's atmosphere, or outer space or heaven as the dwelling place of God, it is true that whatever happens in the one is of importance for the other. This is of course especially true of heaven as the abode of the LORD.

Although this too is part of God's creation work and is included in Genesis 1:1, this chapter does not further inform us of the creation of the angels or give any details about the place where God has His throne (cf. Psalm 14:2; 103:19). The concern of God's revelation in Genesis is the world and what is seen from it.

Genesis 1:1 and false philosophies

The opening verse of Scripture is foundational to so much that it is clearly a passage of great significance whose importance does not diminish with the passing of the years. When the message of this verse is heeded, its relevance becomes clear also in exposing false philosophies and ideas for what they are. Some important ones can be mentioned.

This verse refutes atheism, the belief that God does not exist. Notice that the Word of God does not start with arguments for the existence of God! Scripture simply affirms it. "In the beginning, God" We do not need to prove God's existence. We may start from that fact (cf. Romans 1:18-21).

Also polytheism, the view that there are many gods is opposed by this passage. God (and not gods) "created the heaven and the earth." One can think here of Isaiah 45:18. "For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (He is God!), who formed the earth and made it . . . : 'I am the LORD and there is no other.'" Thus God said in the second word of the covenant "you shall have no other gods before me!" (Exodus 20:3).

Genesis 1:1 likewise leaves no room for materialism. This belief can be defined as holding that "physical matter is the only or fundamental reality and that all being and processes and phenomena can be explained as manifestations or results of

matter” (Webster). Consistent materialism therefore maintains that matter is eternal and only what we can see, handle and touch is really important. The existence of God and the soul of man are denied. The first verse of Scripture, however, shows that God alone is eternal and that He brought matter into being.

Pantheism is also refuted. This philosophy equates God with the laws and forces of the universe. Indeed all things are considered partakers of the one divine essence. Pantheistic thinking is sometimes evident from the manner in which battles for a better ecology and environment are fought (cf. the sacredness of the environment etc.) and it is basic to the growing New Age movement.³ But, God is clearly distinguished from creation in Genesis 1:1 and therefore cannot be identified with it in any way. He is Creator and stands above and beyond creation which is His handiwork.

It is obvious that Genesis 1:1 is a very important verse and a clear and correct understanding of it is crucial. But how does verse one relate to verse two? That question is for next time.

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¹ This article is the first in a series selected from lectures delivered on a popular level. Most of the material has been revised for publication, and in keeping with the nature of *Clarion* footnotes have been kept to an absolute minimum.

² Cf. on this, P.E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (1977), 452 (on Hebrews 11:3).

³ See, e.g., D.R. Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age* (1986), 20f., 48ff.

The Protestant churches in Nazi Germany³

Downfall of the “German Christian” movement

Mueller’s election and the introduction of the Aryan paragraph roused several Protestant leaders out of their complacency, but more was to come. In November 1933 a meeting of 20,000 “German Christians” took place in the Sports Palace, Berlin. The meeting opened with Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress.” In the speeches that followed and in a resolution that was passed, the “German Christians” shed all their inhibitions and showed their radical colours for all to see. Doctrines and confessions were attacked, and speeches as well as resolutions were outspoken in their anti-Semitism: the Jewish elements of Christianity must be discarded; the Old Testament would have to go; the “Rabbi Paul” was to be rejected; the Bible was to be purged of all Jewish influences. No Jews or blacks were to be allowed in the church. German Christians were not the meek, humble followers of some Jewish messiah, some suffering servant, but the proud followers of Christ the conqueror. Their champions were not “the crucified Christ” but “King Christ and the Fuehrer.”

Only one person out of the 20,000 cast a negative vote. The “German Christians” had revealed their satanic platform. Protests streamed in. Many deserted the movement, now that they saw the evil of its theology. Even the Nazi party realized

that the “German Christians” had gone too far: instead of unifying the church and making it complacent, they had caused disunity and aroused the Protestants’ suspicions of the regime. The party disavowed the “German Christians.” So did bishop Mueller. Although various of its constituent groups survived, the “German Christians” as a movement that had the official support of the Nazi party disintegrated. Its heresies, however, stayed very much alive.

Mueller retained his official function, and he soon made it clear that by severing his ties with the “German Christians” he had not relinquished his pro-Nazi stance. Toward the end of December he shocked the churches by signing, on his own authority, an agreement with Von Shirach, the Hitler Youth leader, whereby the 6 or 700,000 members of the Evangelical Youth Organization were transferred to the Hitler Youth. Official protests were of no avail, and those among the young people who refused to go along with the transfer were ostracized by classmates and ill-treated by the authorities. Mueller must have had Hitler’s approval. Hitler once said, in connection with his attempts to subdue the church: “In my youth, I took the view: dynamite. Later I realized that one can’t break the Church over one’s knee. It has to be left to rot like a gangrenous limb . . . But the healthy youth belongs to us.”¹

Resistance: The Pastors’ Emergency League

Opposition by Protestants does not date from the events of the calamitous November and December months. Protests had been heard earlier. Some German churches had drafted statements against the heresies of the “German Christians” already before their takeover of the church, and others did so afterwards. Karl Barth, the well-known Swiss theologian who was a professor of theology at Bonn, also criticized the “German Christian” movement, especially in his writings of the summer of 1933. He completely rejected their programme and refused to allow them church membership.

The famous Dr. Martin Niemoeller, the former U-boat captain, also must be mentioned. In September 1933, after Mueller had incorporated the Aryan paragraph, Niemoeller and other ministers set up the Pastors’ Emergency League, which called upon all dedicated pastors to unite and sign a four-point declaration which bound adherents to Scripture and confessions, and rejected the Aryan paragraph. It is true, as one author has pointed out, that the League avoided any confrontation with the state, and that the Aryan paragraph was rejected only “in the area of the Church of Christ.” It is also true that the League numbered only about 6,000 members in September 1933. That so few